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**Don't Look Where We're Going:
Visions of the Future in Science-Fiction Films, 1970-82**

By the end of the 1960s, it seemed that we were experiencing the most profound crisis in human history. Although our species now possessed the science and technology potentially allowing us to shape the future of the planet according to human needs and desires, we faced these forces as alien powers—which we ourselves had created—slipping out of our control and threatening to wipe us off the planet. America itself was being torn apart by the Vietnam War, with its destruction not only of Indochina but also of our own economy, social cohesion, and illusions about our history and destiny. Amidst a planet in revolution, America's leaders, equipped with pushbuttons to annihilate civilization, seemed ignorant of the past and oblivious to the future. It was no wonder that SF was now a central organ of Anglo-American imagination, pumping its content into many cultural forms.

The apocalyptic imagination had already burst forth into film with images of catastrophe in all shapes—from the very likely possibility of thermonuclear holocaust to absurd projections of the human race being overcome by even the most harmless life forms. By the late 1960s, visions of decay and doom had become the normal Anglo-American cinematic view of our possible future, whether in the over-exposed sterile whiteness of George Lucas's *THX 1138* (1969) or the shattered Statue of Liberty sprawled across the end of the aptly named *Planet of the Apes* (1968). Our only hope for salvation seemed to lie outside ourselves, perhaps with the godlike aliens who might remold someone to rescue us from the killer apes wearing the uniforms of US generals in *2001* (1968).

Back in 1972, I attempted to comprehend this doomsday imagination and concluded that it was an expression of a decaying empire, whose economic and social relations were inexorably disintegrating (in "The Sky is Falling," published as "Chic Bleak in Fantasy Fiction," *Saturday Review: The Arts*, July 15, 1972). At that time, this hypothesis was somewhat speculative, for the decay of the empire was far less evident than today and the doomsday visions of the future tended to imagine external or sudden causes for their catastrophes.

The immediate future of the 1960s is now our immediate past. As we know, the 1970s and early 1980s have been a period of unending and deepening social and economic crises, and visions of the future projected in the Anglo-American SF films during this period have been overwhelmingly pessimistic. No longer limited to displaced symbols of cultural anxiety, many of these films openly proclaim that their dismal futures are extrapolations of tendencies perceived in present society. With a cultural lag typical of the film industry, New Wave SF of the 1960s begins to shape movies a decade or so later. The gloom becomes so conventional that old-fashioned cotton-candy optimism is passed off as audacious cultural innovation.

Selecting one's own examples always make it easy to defend cultural generalizations. Rather than selecting arbitrarily, I'm going to adopt a more scientific procedure, briefly surveying the entire body of films set in the future and released since 1970; then I shall take a close look at all the films offering

coherent views of some future period released after 1980 and prior to the writing of this essay. This exploration will not include films set in a past time even if their surface is quite futuristic (such as *Battlestar Galactica* or the *Star Wars* epic) nor films set in a present which does not transform into a distinct "future" even though extraordinary events occur (*Twilight's Last Gleaming*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *The Extra-Terrestrial*, John Carpenter's 1982 remake of *The Thing*, etc.). To comprehend the cultural significance of these films and of their central images, it will be helpful first to leap back in time to recall the dominant images of the future in very early SF films.

1. The first great archetypal image of the future projected in the early SF film is THE WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE. One thinks immediately of *Metropolis* (1926), where the wonder city is part of a dialectic, consuming the lives of the impoverished masses toiling in its foundations deep in the earth. The dialectic itself was buried in 1930 by Hollywood, which spent a quarter of a million Depression dollars to create, in the ill-starred blockbuster SF musical *Just Imagine*, its own WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE: the magnificent futuristic New York of 1980. In 1936, *Things to Come* displayed THE WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE as the creation of the technological elite, "The Wings Over the World," whose vast airships and space vehicle form the second received archetype, THE MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINE. These early archetypes—THE WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE and THE MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINE—undergo revealing transformations in the visions of the future projected by SF movies released in the 1970s and early 1980s.

According to my count—and I've no doubt missed a few—52 Anglo-American SF movies set wholly or in part in some distinctly future time were released for general distribution from 1970 through early summer 1982.

Only three of these show anything resembling the triumph of progressive technology projected in *Things to Come* (unless one counts *Heart Beeps*, a 1981 farce about robots in love). These are aimed at a mainly juvenile audience, as though we adults, who really know better, think this cotton candy is best left for children. Walt Disney Productions presented *The Black Hole*, where the human environment consists of nothing but MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINES. *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* gives a very brief glimpse, in a clumsy backdrop, of THE WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE and *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan* shows an elegant futuristic room in Captain Kirk's house overlooking San Francisco Bay; but of course most of these two cinematic offshoots of the TV series are also set, like *The Black Hole*, far, far from Earth in MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINES. These are the optimistic visions among the 52. Their optimism can be maintained only by making the MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINE become virtually the entire inhabited universe. The dazzling adventures of the spacers seem to have no relevance whatsoever to the economic and social life of the rest of our species. In stark contrast to this escapism, the "adult" films, as we shall see, tend to show space travel as a means for the hideous monopolistic society on Earth to loot and devastate other parts of the universe.

Equally rare are the old 1950s images of aliens coming to threaten the future of our species. I can think of only two, both released in 1978. As in the original 1950s' alien invader movie, the aliens in the remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* are primarily metaphors for forces already present and shaping the future. No longer representing the communists, the pods are now, as many have noted, indistinguishable from the mods they replace. Altogether vanished are the middle-American, small-town virtues whose imminent demise

constitutes the nightmare of the original. That other 1978 release, *The End of the World*, is virtually a parody of 1950s alien invader movies. In fact it ends with the vicious aliens not only destroying the Earth but forcing the last human survivors—our hero and heroine, the converse of Adam and Eve—to watch the whole show on TV, where we actually see footage from previous disaster movies, with earthquakes, volcanoes, fires, floods, and so on.

We get a similar show in *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1979), where the ponderous narration of Orson Welles accompanies images of the destruction of the world by earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, and killer bees as part of "Nature's growing offensive" culminating in "the Jupiter Effect of 1982." But one should note that all this mess is actually caused somehow by various human behavior, including terrorism, pollution, nuclear war, communism, fascism, DNA research, religious sects and gurus, the European Common Market, Red China, Red Russia, and Black Africa.

Movies set in the present do continue to marshal more or less successful forays against us by such monsters as worms, bugs, bees, sharks, a giant gorilla, and so on, as in *Squirm*, *The Swarm*, *The Bees*, *Empire of the Ants*, *Bug*, the *Jaws* films, and the remake of *King Kong*. But none of those 52 films of the future shows other life forms from Earth affecting the course of human history, except for the four sequels to *The Planet of the Apes*: *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970), *Escape from the Planet of the Apes* (1971), *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972), and *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (1973). The remaining films display catastrophic or very nasty futures caused directly by human behavior or human creations.

In *Colossus*, *The Forbin Project* (1970), the war computers of the US and the USSR link up to rule the planet. In *No Blade of Grass* (1970), pollution has devastated the environment. Biological warfare destroys most of the human race in *The Omega Man* (1971), while it is poison gas that kills everybody over the age of 25 in Roger Corman's *Gas-s-s! Or, It Became Necessary to Destroy the World in Order to Save It* (1970; an echo of the assertion by the US officer who ordered the annihilation of the Vietnamese village of Ben Tre, "It was necessary to destroy the town in order to save it"). A post-holocaust future is the setting for the X-rated *Glen and Randa* (1971), *The Ultimate Warrior* (1975), *A Boy and His Dog* (1975), *Damnation Alley* (1977), and *Logan's Run* (1976), which begins with a roll-up stating that the scene is after the catastrophe caused by overpopulation AND pollution AND thermonuclear war. In *Z.P.G.* (1972) and *Soylent Green* (1973), overpopulation has helped spawn evil governments, in the former one that bans births, in the latter one that feeds its citizens with green crackers made out of the corpses of fellow citizens.

Not one of these 52 movies shows a functioning democracy in the future. Many display future societies ruled by some form of conspiracy, monopoly, or totalitarian apparatus. *THX 1138* (1969; 1970) shows a conformistic police state in which one of the most terrifying images is an enlargement of the police who were then beating up anti-Vietnam-War demonstrators. *Ice* (1970) focuses on underground revolutionaries fighting back against a police state extrapolated from the same social scene of the late 1960s. The technocratic order extolled in the 1936 *Things To Come* has become the nemesis in these movies as well as in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), where those who impose order are presented as even more frightening than the terrifying disorder they attempt to suppress. Other varieties of our dreadful political future appear in *Sleeper* (1973), *Zardoz* (1974), *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (1976), *Capricorn One* (1978; of course really a thinly veiled picture of the present), *Alien* (1979), *Saturn 3* (1980), and the four most recent movies, which we will explore more

closely, *Escape from New York* (1981), *Outland* (1981), *The Last Chase* (1981), and *Parasite* (1982).

A little subgenre of this type appears in the form of future worlds where the most interesting remaining normal human activity is some kind of sport or amusement, usually deadly, as in *Westworld* (1973), *Rollerball* and *Death Race 2000* (both 1975), *Futureworld* (1976), and *Deathsport* (1978).

In the 1970s and 1980s, the fundamental contradictions of US society have become visibly blatant in its cities, where high above the pot-holed streets, sleazy porno districts, decayed public transit, delapidated small businesses, cockroach-infested housing, violence, and squalor have soared vestiges of that old visionary SF WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE in the form of banks and corporate headquarters in glittering futuristic skyscrapers. It's no surprise that THE WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE rarely appears any longer in the cinematic visions of tomorrow, except occasionally as some kind of domed world of illusory pleasures, as in *Logan's Run* or *Futureworld*. Instead, the cities of the present have been reduced to rubble through which our poor descendants have their last pathetic adventures. Fragments of our decayed world are almost a cliché: the ruins of New York are strewn from the *Apes* movies through *The Ultimate Warrior* to the first episode of *Heavy Metal* (1981) and *Escape from New York*, featuring the rat-infested subways, the crumbled pillars of the Stock Exchange, and the New York Public Library as the site of a creaky primitive oil well. The political center of America now appears as the ivy-covered ruins of the Capitol in *Logan's Run*, while middle America is anything from a series of abandoned towns inhabited by monstrous mutants in *Damnation Alley* to the underground All-American nightmare of Topeka in *A Boy and his Dog*.

When THE MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINE makes an appearance, it is usually as a harbinger not of progress but of terror. It may be a vehicle bringing either some threatening alien life-form—as in *The Andromeda Strain* (1971) or *Alien*—or assassins sent by human powers—as in *Outland*—or some hideous human invention—as in *Saturn 3*. In *Zardoz*, THE MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINE is no longer either a sleek aerodynamic beauty or an intricate functional maze of machinery but a grotesque mask presiding over the subjugation and programmed killing of the effete survivors on Earth. In *Dark Star* (1974), the purpose of THE MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINE is to annihilate stars that are deemed inconvenient. In *Silent Running* (1972), it is the final repository of Earth's remaining vegetation; when the heartless technocratic authorities on Earth order the jettisoning of this cargo, we are supposed to applaud the response of the introspective captain (Bruce Dern), who murders the crew and embarks with his plants and robots on a lonely quest into deep space. In *Capricorn One*, manned space travel has degenerated into a hoax, and the US government is out to kill off its phony spacemen so they can't reveal that THE MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINE hasn't really gone any place. In *The Last Chase*, the last remaining flying machine is a decrepit ancient T-38 piloted by an alcoholic Burgess Meredith in a suicide attack on one of the last vestiges of technological "progress," an automated laser gun. In a world living under the incessant threat of thermonuclear doomsday, movies might find it difficult to project the kind of salvation from war envisioned by *Things to Come*, with its technocratic elite forming a beneficent "Wings Over the World."

2. Of the four most recent movies displaying the future, *The Last Chase* is probably the worst example of cinematic art, in both form and content.

Nevertheless, as a cultural symptom of the early 1980s, it is well worth our attention.

Sometime in the 1980s, a mysterious plague had wiped out most of the population. Simultaneously, oil had either run out or was somehow shut off. (Though released in 1981, *The Last Chase* has tell-tale signs of being made somewhat earlier, back perhaps in 1979 when we didn't know about the global glut in oil as we were waiting in lines at the gas station.) The implication is that "They"—the all-powerful bureaucrats in Washington—had shut off the oil and maybe even released some biological agent to wipe out droves of people. Why? Because "They" believe that society must be static and stationary. Their *bête noire* is the private automobile, which allows the individual to be mobile and free. We can tell that these rulers are evil because they are committed to mass transit, solar power, pacifism, and a calm, regulated life in a few cities under their total control.

The scene is now 20 years later—that is in the 21st century. Franklin Hart (Lee Majors), a former race car driver, has buried his red Porsche under his garage. He works in what seems THE WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE, actually a sinister anti-utopia with efficient mass transit, soaring futuristic buildings, and empty streets except for bicycles and sparse groups of pedestrians. Technology is concentrated in the computer and communications network which is used for total surveillance and bureaucratic omnipotence. Majors is about to be arrested for social deviance because his lectures to schoolchildren have been hinting that things were better in the past. *The Last Chase* projects the opposite of Wells's vision of the technocratic WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE in *Things to Come*: the technocrats are now the bad guys and the good guys are the reactionaries. (Even the plague that helps pave the way for the rule of the technocrats seems to be a reversed image from *Things to Come*.)

Enter the boy genius—a bespectacled misfit who has been jamming the state's jam-proof communications network with a transmitter he's thrown together out of spare parts. Hart, who has lost his own son in the plague, finds a new son in the boy genius. Together, they take off across the country in Hart's race car in search of freedom in the far West, which has been beaming subversive messages on Radio Free California.

The state gets Captain Williams (Burgess Meredith), the unappreciated jet ace of both the Korean War and the Vietnam War, now a kite-flying dipsomaniac, to give chase in that last MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINE, the old T-38 armed with machine guns—and napalm. The setting for this epic conflict is the North American continent.

At this point, *The Last Chase* becomes a road movie, very similar in its mythic configuration to *Damnation Alley*. In each film, a tiny group of heroic survivors, beset by dangers on all sides, drives across a ruined America in search of some place where the good old past still lives. The transcontinental road ends in each movie with the quest completed as our heroes drive into a recreation of the mythic small town of the past. The small town community in *Damnation Alley* is Albany, New York; in *The Last Chase* it is some unnamed town in Free California. Both scenes are identical, with a band of citizens from the good old American small town community strung out along the road as a cheering welcoming committee. This quest for the mythic middle-American past is the exact opposite of the vision in *A Boy and his Dog*, where it is the values of middle America itself that have launched the devastation, and where the red-white-and-blue Mom-and-apple-pie underground town of Topeka is the demonic center of the hell it has created.

In *The Last Chase*, the private automobile in its most gas-guzzling avatar—the roaring Porsche race car—symbolizes the opposition to bureaucracy, the state, conformism, solar power, mass transit, ecology, anti-war movements, and other equally sinister parts of progress. The grizzled supermale and the boy genius heading ever-westward in the last private car incarnate an ironic twist of the first great formative myth of popular SF.

In late 19th-century America, the most popular and influential form of culture was not the movies or television but the dime novel. Probably the very first SF dime novel was Edward Sylvester Ellis's *The Steam Man of the Prairies*, which appeared in 1865, at the exact moment of the triumph of industrial capitalism in America. The hero, typical of the SF dime novel, is a lone genius in the form of a teenaged boy: Johnny Brainerd, a 15-year-old dwarfed, hunchbacked lad whose father has died. Johnny's masterpiece among his many inventions is a ten-foot-tall robot driven by an internal steam engine, capable of speeding along at 60 miles an hour while drawing a four-passenger carriage, also designed and built by Johnny all by himself. Johnny Brainerd, with his hand-crafted 60-mile-per-hour horseless carriage, foreshadows the figure of Henry Ford and those swarms of horseless carriages which, together with their manufacturers, have transformed our environment. His machine is the progenitor of the long line that will end with Franklin Hart's red Porsche.

Having created his wonderful machine, Johnny receives a brand new father in the person of a grizzled old hunter, trapper, and gold-miner from the West. Together they pack the steam man into a crate and take him out West, to exploit the old man-of-action's fabulous gold strike and to kill off hordes of "treacherous" "redskin" "savages." This father and son who together, without benefit of women, will breed the future of America are now replaced by the father and son driving alone to a past that never existed but whose myth may be capable of destroying us all. Indeed, there are some internal hints that *The Last Chase* might originally have been intended to assist the campaign of another questor after that mythic past, who came from California to capture the White House.

3. *Outland* also seeks to recreate the past, but in quite a different form. Space is the New Frontier, a notion popularized by Robert A. Heinlein and politicized by John F. Kennedy, and the movie is of course a space version of *High Noon*.

Outland is set in the not-too-distant future on Io, one of Jupiter's moons, in a mining colony belonging to the now familiar gigantic monopolistic Company. The newly arrived Marshall (Sean Connery) pits his lonely existential heroism against the omnipresent depravity and greed personified by the ruthless General Manager (Peter Boyle), ironically named Shepphard, who has been speeding up the workers with an amphetamine that slowly destroys their minds. (As in *9 to 5*, it's middle management that takes the rap for the worst crimes of the corporations.)

The Marshall finds himself deserted by everybody but the hardbitten burnt-out Company doctor with a cynical exterior and a heart of pure cornmush (brilliantly played by Frances Sternhagen). Writer and director Peter Hyams, who also did *Capricorn One*, gives a revealing reason for having changed the doctor's role from a man to a woman: "After the first draft of the script, I decided it was absurd for a picture set in the future to be unpopulated by women" (*New York Times*, May 26, 1981). What this reveals is made even more blatant by a widely syndicated film critic (Richard Freedman) whose review calls the doctor "the satellite nurse."

The entire colony of tough workers is too cowardly to defend themselves, so soon the Marshall finds himself being stalked by the Manager's hired killers, whose arrival time on THE MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINE is marked by the camera cutting frequently to a digital clock, reminding us that we are indeed watching a futuristic version of *High Noon*, that classic western appearing in—and about—the 1950s. In *High Noon*, however, Gary Cooper is making the frontier safe for the advance of the cowardly burghers who represent capitalist civilization. In *Outland* the gunslinging embodiment of law and order is merely keeping things from getting any worse in this hellish labor colony; he is just draining a little pus from one of the abscesses of decaying interplanetary monopoly capitalism.

Outland is actually two different movies. One is a somewhat illogical but mildly entertaining recreation of the western form of the myth of the lone hero—the lone lawman, the lone ranger. (Unlike Tonto, however, his non-white subordinate turns out to be a coward who joins the bad guys.) What we have here is a broken fragment of a myth, a shard, floating around like other fragments in a disintegrating world. (*Battle Beyond the Stars*, a minor 1980 masterpiece by Roger Corman, embodies this in Cowboy, a lonely raygun slinger from Earth recruited to defend a distant planet of pacifists against evil alien imperialists.)

The other movie in *Outland* is, in all senses of the term, a *set* of images. The mining colony is an overwhelming image of alienation. The workers labor in conditions that combine the claustrophobic dangers of deep South African gold mines, the treacherous isolation of offshore or North Slope oil rigs, and the entrapment of a modern prison. A three-dimensional chase through their quarters takes us through what seem endless stacks of cages, as though Borges' "The Library of Babel" had been used as a blueprint by the Company in designing a warehouse for its workers. Early in the movie, we see the consequences of venturing outside this entirely artificial alien environment into the even more alien natural surroundings: a worker, his mind consumed by the drug that has made him speed up his production, wanders outside the pressurized world without his space suit and explodes (not that this would happen in reality).

The two movies come to a rather unsatisfactory juncture when the chase culminates in the climactic shootout. Both Sean Connery and the two assassins are rather improbably armed with weapons out of the the 19th century—shotguns—a heavy-handed reminder that we're witnessing a western set in space, the mythic past projected into an imagined future. A shotgun blows a hole in the wall separating the interior artificial world, with its alienated labor, from the exterior world, with its deadly emptiness. But the gaping hole between the pressurized interior world and the airless exterior world merely serves as a convenience of the adventure plot, disposing of one of the nasty gunmen. *Outland* ends up as uninterested in the workers and their predicament as they seem to be in the plot.

Outland's vision of the giant monopoly and its slave-like workers is certainly never reduced to the absurdity of the end of *Metropolis*, where the dictator at the head of the monopoly shakes hands with the spokesman of his workers and agrees to reform the system. Nor does *Outland* project the outlandish notion central to *Things to Come*, that the technocrats will save all the rest of us—stupid sheep that we are—from ourselves and from the vicious predators we mindlessly obey. But the limits of *Outland's* imagination become clear when we compare it with Heinlein's remarkably similar story "Logic of Empire," which appeared in 1941, 40 years earlier. Unlike *Outland*, "Logic of

Empire" sees the slave labor colonies on Venus as products of a particular economic system located within history and being changed by the processes of history. Heinlein's story shows the consciousness of both the capitalists and the workers determined by the conditions of their class existence, but for the workers this means not the stupefying cowardice projected in *Outland* but the beginnings of resistance and rebellion. Hollywood seems, for whatever reason, unwilling or unable to handle such a theme. Perhaps the closest we have is one of the true masterpieces of the genre, *Alien*, in which it is the workers and the women who understand the true situation, and learn what to do about it, far better than their stereotypical ultra-competent super-male commander, who unwittingly serves the most fiendish designs of the monopolistic Company.

4. The first vision of the future projected in 1982 has to be seen through glasses that are not only rose-colored but also polarized. It is the 3D thriller *Parasite*, brazenly set just a decade ahead in 1992. America is now a virtual wasteland under the unofficial tyranny and open terror of the "Merchants." As one character explains: "You can't tell the Government and the Merchants apart any more; they work for each other." The economy has collapsed, and paper money is worthless; regular gas costs \$29.98 a gallon, payable in gold or silver; practically no food is available except for old canned goods and such rare luxuries as packets of sugar or instant coffee; the landscape is strewn with abandoned cars and houses; some mysterious "atomic shit" has rained down on New York City, sending survivors fleeing into remote small towns.

As in *Outland*, work has been reduced to blatant slave labor, but here the "work camps" run by the Merchants are established not on a moon of Jupiter but in the suburbs of America. The significance of this is spelled out. Witnessing an especially gruesome death of a friend, one escapee from these work camps laments: "It's just like the suburbs all over again—you can't care for anybody."

Parasite combines that first great myth emerging out of industrial capitalism—Frankenstein—with that now all-too-familiar myth of small-town America. The scientist, Dr Paul Dean, author of the weighty tome *The Pathology of Parasites*, has created, on special orders from the state, a brand new super-parasite, capable of either eating people up from inside or growing to enormous size by grabbing them from outside and sucking out all their blood. This parasite, potentially capable of boundless reproduction, bears a striking resemblance to the creature in *Alien*, which may help explain why the Merchants, like the Company in *Alien*, are so eager to get it into profitable operation.

Dr Dean realizes the sinister alienation of his scientific labor, rebels against the state, and destroys all but two of his creatures: one growing inside him, another he needs for experiments to figure out how to kill the one inside. He manages to escape with his books, laboratory apparatus, and the two creatures to the little town of Joshua, "Population 64, Altitude 1100."

There he is befriended by a Black bartender recently escaped from New York and a young woman who grows lemon trees in her little Edenic garden so that she can offer fresh lemonade as a nice healthy old-fashioned alternative to the unrelieved diet of leftover canned goods. Dr Dean and his new friends are abused by a hot-rod gang of young bullies and their molls and hunted down by the Merchants, embodied by a thin-lipped crewcut blond in a dark three-piece suit, careening around in a futuristic car, and armed with a death-ray gun in his black-gloved hand.

The little adventure has a happy ending: Dr Dean discovers the means to

kill the parasite within; the other parasite and the Merchant are consumed in flames; even the hot-rod gangsters turn out to be decent young people, just driven to bad attitudes and behavior by their environment. However, as usual in these recent visions of the future, although the good people win their little adventure against overwhelming odds, both their heroism and their victory are essentially irrelevant. Typical of the heroes of these movies, they overcome some especially horrible excrescence of their society, without even trying to deal with the fundamental evil, which remains omnipotent and unassailable.

5. The despair of *Outland* and *Parasite* looks like bubbling optimism alongside the bleak landscape of *Escape from New York*, directed and partly written by John Carpenter, who in 1974 had done *Dark Star*, one of a handful of truly original SF films. The time is 1997. America is a thinly-concealed fascist society in a chronic state of war, escalating crime, and social decay.

The President is on his way to a summit meeting with the Soviets, arranged as a last desperate attempt to avert thermonuclear war while preserving US power. An underground revolutionary organization hijacks his plane; it crashes into Manhattan, which had been sealed off in the 1980s, turned into a prison colony, and left to the anarchy of its inmates, who are patrolled by the killer helicopters of the United States Police Force, garrisoned, appropriately enough, at the Statue of Liberty. THE WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE is now society's garbage dump, a pile of rubble and human rot prefiguring worse things to come. THE MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINE is now represented by the smoldering wreck of Air Force One, being looted by New York's raggedy criminals, the helicopters of the police state, and, in a fitting come-down, a glider which lands on the abandoned World Trade Center in a final attempt to save the President and the world—or at least keep it safe for American democracy.

As in *The Last Chase*, *Outland*, and *Parasite*, the plot centers on the adventure of a lone hero fighting, along with a helper or two, against near-impossible odds and overwhelming forces. As usual, he will win his minor victory in a hopeless world. Heroes challenge evil empires and change history only in such escapist times and places as the setting of the *Star Wars* epic: "Long ago, and in a galaxy far, far away...."

The lone hero of *Escape from New York* is Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell), once the Special Forces hero of the Siberia Campaign, now a notorious bank robber. The US Police have implanted an explosive, which only they can deactivate, in Snake's neck, giving him only 24 hours to rescue the President from the apparent arch-villain, the Duke of New York, played by Isaac Hayes and driving around, as a racist caricature of Black aspirations, in a limousine bedecked with crystal chandeliers. Sporting a sinister patch and limp, and aided by a resourceful veteran cab driver (just like the cabbie in the first episode of *Heavy Metal*, who also maneuvers craftily through the crime-infested rubble of the future New York), Snake slithers on his mission through the collapsing concrete jungle of Manhattan (actually photographed mainly in St Louis).

At the end, Snake delivers the President, but temporarily withholds the secret tape that the President is about to broadcast to the Soviet leaders. Then he watches with disgust as the President, in a power-mad frenzy, sprays the Duke with submachine-gun fire. Snake's face cagily records the nihilistic message symbolized by this scene, he hands over a tape, and we listen as the President broadcasts what he proclaims as his final proposal to the Soviets—the pop-music tape Snake has just given him. Apparently nothing now stands in

the way of the final apocalypse for this rotten world of the very near future.

6. This essay so far was written before the appearance in June, 1982, of *Blade Runner*, the movie version of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* The film exemplifies so much of what I have been arguing that there is a strong temptation to discuss it at length, great length. I'll resist this temptation. But we should briefly note a few telling features. When Dick published the novel in 1968, he envisioned his desolate California scene coming as a consequence of an atomic war. After the decay of the 1970s, the movie is able to dispense with any such cataclysm and to project its utter desolation as a consequence, in the very near future, merely of present social trends (it could easily have been titled *Escape from Los Angeles*). THE WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE has now been reduced to a few palaces of almighty technology, particularly the headquarters of the Police and the headquarters of the monopolistic Company, soaring above the omnipresent squalor. THE MARVELOUS FLYING MACHINE, garishly advertised as the only way to escape from the hell on Earth, is actually bringing back to Earth our final technological masterpiece, deadly artificial replicants of humanity.

If archaeologists can infer something of the character of a society from a few shards, certainly visions of the future created by large groups of highly skilled people armed with advanced technology, financed by millions of dollars, on behalf of giant corporations, intended to make handsome profits by enticing the cost of expensive tickets from masses of consumers, must reveal something about the character of our own society. Of course they mirror the profound social decay we are experiencing. Obviously some of them are also meant as warnings.

We must be cautious in making inferences from these despairing visions of the future. After all, more optimistic products have come out of Hollywood, including the current resident of the White House. It's by no means clear that all this pessimism sells well to the public. And certainly there is more to American culture than its movie industry. After all, we do have video games. But perhaps these visions are the appropriate imaginative projections of a society that is destroying its own cities to finance its "defense" against alleged external enemies, a society that has borrowed over \$1,000,000,000,000 from the future in order to construct the marvelous weapons that may guarantee that there won't be any future humans to collect the debts.

Given the military, economic, and political hegemony of the US in much of the world, these cultural projections are also profoundly frightening. The only future that seems unimaginable in Hollywood is a better one. With no better vision of the future than these to offer, the US may possibly succeed in forcing the rest of the world into one of the kinds of future Hollywood can imagine. Perhaps these movies are then best seen as warnings—whether or not intended—not to follow the leadership of a society that either doesn't know where it's going or sees its own future as hopeless.

RÉSUMÉ

H. Bruce Franklin. "Ne cherche pas à savoir où on va": les Visions de l'avenir dans le cinéma de SF de 1970 à 1982.—L'auteur procède à un examen systématique de cette production anglo-américaine; on assiste à un abandon significatif des films de monstre et de fin du monde des années cinquante et soixante. Un imaginaire du désespoir s'exprime, qui reflète la désintégration sociale et économique d'un empire mondial et contient de nombreux présages pour l'avenir. On centre l'examen

sur les transformations de deux archétypes reçus de la tradition filmique antérieure—la "Merveilleuse Ville du Future" et "Ces Sensationnelles Machines volantes"—et on délimite par là certains points critiques de l'imagination culturelle d'une société qui se sent gravement malade, ne peut plus concevoir un avenir riant et consomme compulsivement le présent en vue d'éliminer tout avenir possible. (HBF)

Abstract.— *A systematic examination of the visions of the future projected in Anglo-American SF films from 1970 through mid-1982 reveals a significant shift from the monster and doomsday movies of the 1950s and 1960s. These cinematic projections of the imagination of despair express the accelerating social and economic disintegration of a world empire and contain ominous implications about the actual future. By focusing on the transformations of the two key archetypes received from early SF movies—"The Wonder City of the Future" and "The Marvelous Flying Machine"—it is possible to chart critical areas of the cultural imagination of a society that perceives itself as terminally ill, cannot conceive of a better future, and is compulsively consuming the present in order to produce the means for eliminating any human future. (HBF)*